

By Ald. Robert J. Bauman

Transportation Investments: Let's Level The Playing Field & Think Strategically to Save Tax Dollars and Improve Mobility

Three recent transportation developments demonstrate the need for a new strategic approach to transportation investments in southeastern Wisconsin.

The first was news that the recently approved state budget did not include a funding source for the local share of operating and capital costs of the proposed \$198 million, 33-mile Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee ("KRM") commuter rail service. As a result, the project may now be delayed for up to two years. (Ironically, a major concern expressed by KRM supporters is that the commuter service would not be up and running when reconstruction work commences on I-94 from the Illinois state line to Milwaukee).

Related to this story, was the recent announcement that WisDOT plans a \$1.9 billion reconstruction and expansion of I-94 from the Illinois state line to Milwaukee—a 35-mile roadway that parallels the proposed KRM commuter rail service. Significantly, this project -- unlike the KRM commuter rail project -- does not require on-line counties and municipalities to pay any portion of the cost thereby eliminating potential opposition to the project because of new or increased local taxes. State and federal funds would cover this entire investment.

Finally, it was recently announced that WisDOT is again advancing a \$400 million proposal to implement high-speed intercity passenger rail service between Chicago and Milwaukee (over the existing Amtrak line) and extend that service to Madison using existing railroad tracks. This plan would be funded by a combination of state and federal funds. However, the necessary federal action to make these funds available has been bogged down in Congress for many years.

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Each of these proposed investments share many similarities: First, all three investments would utilize existing transportation infrastructure—two existing rail lines and an existing interstate highway. Second, each investment serves the 35-mile corridor linking Kenosha, Racine and Milwaukee which in turn would link these communities with northern Illinois, Chicago and points west of Milwaukee. Significantly, these three transportation arteries are all within a maximum of seven miles of each other. Third, each investment is being promoted as being vital to economic development in southeastern Wisconsin.

But this is where the similarities end.

The \$1.9 billion reconstruction and expansion of I-94 is proceeding while the \$198 million KRM commuter rail project has stalled and the high-speed rail proposal is bogged down in Congress. The principle reason in the case of the KRM commuter rail service is that local communities must find a local funding source while there is no such requirement for the I-94 project. In the case of high speed rail, it is the historic distinction between how interstate highway projects are funded vs. the funding of interstate passenger rail projects.

Also, there is no discussion of structuring these investments in a way that will complement each other despite their similarities. For example, is it necessary to expand I-94 from six lanes to eight lanes if first class commuter rail and high speed rail service were implemented in the same corridor that serves the same communities? Could that portion of the proposed I-94 investment pertaining to expansion be invested in implementing commuter rail and/or high speed rail service resulting in an overall savings to taxpayers and improved overall mobility within the region?

Finally, the I-94 investment seems to ignore the impact of rising gasoline and crude oil prices, increasing concerns about global warming, and the well documented cost of urban sprawl. It seems that price is no object when it comes to expanding highways; but when it comes to implementing rail projects financing always seem to be an insurmountable obstacle.

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Yes, I-94 needs to be rebuilt. But it does not need to be expanded given the proposals to implement commuter rail and high-speed rail in the same corridor. Instead the funds that would be required for expansion should be invested in commuter rail and high-speed rail eliminating the need for a local funding source for the KRM commuter rail service and eliminating the need for state bonding for the high-speed rail service (which is WisDOT's plan to finance the state share). The combined cost of these projects would be reduced, implementation of all three projects would be assured, residents of southeastern Wisconsin would see a significant expansion of their travel choices and we would be creating viable alternatives to the private automobile for travel within the corridor as a hedge against the economic impact of future increases in gasoline prices.

In short, we need a new way of thinking about transportation infrastructure that emphasizes infrastructure coordination, increased mobility and more choices rather than maximizing highway lane miles while leaving all other modes to feed off the scraps.

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